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U.S. SECURITY ASSISTANCE FOR EL SALVADOR

by

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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The suitability of future U.S. security assistance support to the government of El Salvador is reviewed in light of the collapse of the Soviet Union, shifting U.S. priorities, and the signing of the Salvadoran peace accords. The examination is conducted by reviewing U.S. interests, the risks and benefits of security assistance, and the current political and economic conditions in El Salvador. The U.S. has a variety of interests in El Salvador, dominated by El Salvador's potential to induce regional instability. U.S. national security interests are best served by an independent and cooperative El Salvador. Security assistance programs possess a range of effective tools to protect U.S. interests through the continued viability of the democratic government of El Salvador. With the signing of the peace accords, the primary threat to the Salvadoran government has shifted from the armed insurgency to the devastated infrastructure and crippled economy. Security assistance to El Salvador should be continued, increasing the emphasis on economic and infrastructure development, and reducing emphasis on arms sales. Future support should be designed on a phased reduction basis, linking reductions to the successful achievement of objectives, and a finite time line for accomplishment. This gradual reduction reduces the risks of perpetuating dependency and an erosion of Salvadoran autonomy.

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U. S. SECURITY ASSISTANCE FOR EL SALVADOR

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to review the need for continued Security Assistance program support to the government of El Salvador. As the world rapidly changes, and the U.S. reorders its national priorities to reflect its vital interests, the issue of security assistance will come under great scrutiny. A reexamination of assistance to El Salvador is needed in view of two dramatic changes. The first is the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the reduction, if not elimination, of substantial aid to insurgent forces from former Soviet client states.¹ The second watershed event is the signing of a peace accord between the Government of El Salvador and the rebel leadership. Significant elements of the agreement include disarmament of the rebels, dramatic decreases in the size of the armed forces, and the creation of a civil police force that will include participation of former rebels in all levels of administration and operation.²

In a period of massive budget deficits, a stagnant economy, and presidential election politics advocating an isolationist "America First" platform, all forms of foreign aid are vulnerable. U.S. security policy has changed following the end of the Soviet Union as a superpower. U.S.

national defense strategy and attendant military force structure is shifting to a posture that focuses on maintaining regional stability.²

While this paper focuses on the strategic level, decisions concerning security assistance to El Salvador have strategic, operational and tactical ramifications. At the strategic level the presence, essentiality, or absence of U.S. interests in El Salvador will dictate the form and function of security assistance to be provided, if any. This will in turn define the operational, and ultimately the tactical, landscape for the regional CINC.

This analysis will be conducted through a review of U.S. interests in El Salvador, an overview of the security assistance program, a review of the suitability of continued security assistance to El Salvador, and finally a recommended model for future assistance.

CHAPTER II

U.S. NATIONAL INTERESTS IN EL SALVADOR

The first question that must be asked before committing our resources to a foreign country is necessarily selfish: "What's in it for us?" If this nation is acting on other than a purely humanitarian motive, there must be some return on our investment, the attainment of some national objective or goal. In 1977, the position that "the United States really has no vital interest in [El Salvador]," was advanced by no less than the American Ambassador to El Salvador.⁴ Within three years, another U.S. Ambassador to El Salvador would say:

El Salvador had become the pivotal state, and it could very well be that its success or failure would spell success or failure for all of Central America.⁵

Such widely divergent views held by two men charged with safeguarding U.S. interests related to that nation underscore the need for reviewing U.S. interests in El Salvador.

The National Security Strategy of the United States outlines the current national interests and objectives. At its core are four broad interests, from which U.S. interests in El Salvador can be derived:

National Interest: "The survival of the United States as a free and independent nation, with its fundamental values intact, social justice upheld, and people protected."⁶ The

physical security of the U.S. southern flank is enhanced by economically, politically, and militarily stable nations in the southern hemisphere.⁷ An overtly hostile or expansionistic government in El Salvador could threaten regional stability through direct military action with its neighbors, or by exporting revolution or terrorism. But it is the danger of internal instability affecting neighboring states that is more likely. Insurrection or civil war can progressively destabilize a region through cross-border dynamics such as refugee flight. The recent exodus of Haitian refugees is a dramatic display of this. Thus the stability of the region relies on the internal stability of nations such as El Salvador.

National Interest: "A healthy and growing U.S. economy to ensure opportunity for individual prosperity and resources for national endeavors at home and abroad."⁸ A prosperous and economically cooperative southern hemisphere improves U.S. economic security through the expansion of markets. Fundamental changes in the world have reshaped U.S. economic interest in the region. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, military power is no longer the preeminent definition of global power.⁹ Economic power is the newest arena, an arena in which the U.S. faces fierce competition from the far east and Europe. Trade negotiations between the U.S., Japan, and Germany are on the same strategic level as our arms talks with

the former Soviet Union, reflecting the high stakes of this competition.¹⁰

This emergence of a new economic tri-polarism replacing military bi-polarism finds the U.S. moving to consolidate the Americas into a major integrated trading block.¹¹ Current total annual imports/exports with Latin America totals \$120 billion, compared with \$200 billion with western Europe and \$225 billion with the far east.¹² With additional economic development, free trade initiatives, and market development, this amount could rise dramatically. Development and exploitation of a free trade block of the Americas, with a market base of 600 million consumers, would provide the U.S. more flexibility in its trade relationships with Europe and the far east.

Despite the critical nature of this general interest, El Salvador's positive contributive power in this area is slight. With a total gross domestic product of only \$4.6 billion (1986), El Salvador is unable alone to improve the U.S. trade balance directly.¹³ Even so, El Salvador can contribute to the future economic growth of the region by improving its own economy, and trading within the region. Far more significant in impact, a belligerent El Salvador could disrupt regional cooperation and retard the growth of the region by forcing neighboring states to shift resources from economic

development to defense.

National Interest: "Healthy, cooperative and politically vigorous relations with allies and friendly nations."¹⁴

U.S. interest in El Salvador in this area is much the same as our interest in any other member of the international community. It is in our interest not to estrange any friendly nation on whom we might rely on for support in bilateral or multilateral forums.

The world order is not static. Our relations with other nations in the region may change in the future. A cooperative relationship with El Salvador could prove to be essential in maintaining U.S. capabilities to respond effectively to a crisis in the region. Use of Salvadoran airspace, port facilities, and temporary basing may be essential for power projection in the region.

El Salvador, as a member of the United Nations and the Organization of American States (OAS), may choose to support or oppose U.S. interests. Qualitatively, El Salvador's limited resources and power limits the importance of its support, even in the smaller forum of the OAS.

The U.S. also can benefit from cooperative political ties with El Salvador through their demonstrative value. By dealing with El Salvador as a sovereign peer, the U.S. can

develop an aura of "partnership" with nations in the region. Again, this is not a unique interest that El Salvador holds for the U.S..

National Interest: "A stable and secure world, where political and economic freedom, human rights and democratic institutions flourish."¹⁵ One must look to the subordinate objectives of this interest to narrow its perspective. The National Security Strategy calls for actions to promote regional military balance, diplomatic solutions, growth and protection of free and democratic political institutions, and development of social and political progress. It summarizes the intent by stating that "Our interests are best served in a world in which democracy and its ideals are widespread and secure."¹⁶

An El Salvador fully meeting the requirements of this model contributes directly to this global interest, but only incrementally. Of larger importance to this interest are the ramifications of a U.S. failure to sustain a free and democratic government in El Salvador. By stating an interest that is global in nature, a failure to deliver in our own regional back yard would damage our credibility, and raise doubts of our commitment and capabilities.¹⁷

Based on the above, it is my conclusion that U.S. interests in El Salvador should be ranked as:

Regional stability and southern flank security. It is the latent capacity of El Salvador to be a "spoiler" in regional stability and not its positive value as a model democracy that defines this interest.

Superpower credibility. U.S. prestige is at risk based on general and specific commitments to the continuation of a free and democratic government in El Salvador.

Economic and political cooperation. El Salvador represents an incremental interest in a broad network of international and regional ties. It is the capacity of El Salvador to disrupt this network that is most significant.

To protect our interests, our objectives should be to ensure the viability of El Salvador's democratic government, and to encourage continued political, social, and economic reform. This will improve Salvadoran internal stability, maintain U.S. credibility, and reduce the potential for regional instability.

CHAPTER III

THE ROLE OF SECURITY ASSISTANCE

If the continued viability of El Salvador's democratic government is in the best interest of the U.S., is security assistance an appropriate tool to further our interests? To answer that question it is necessary to describe briefly the relevant component programs of security assistance.

Foreign Military Financing (FMF) is a low interest financing and grant aid program enabling friendly nations to acquire U.S. military equipment, services, and training.

Economic Support Fund (ESF) is a grant program that encourages political and economic reform, broad development and market economy initiatives.

International Military Education and Training (IMET) provides professional military education and technical skills training to officers, senior enlisted, and civilian members of foreign defense ministeries.

Foreign Military Sales (FMS) is the program that executes and administers all government to government sales of military equipment.¹²

These programs further U.S. interests in two broad ways. First, the receipt of affordable military equipment, services and technical training through FMF/FME and IMET improves the national security of the receiving nation. Ancillary benefits to the U.S. include increased interoperability with U.S. forces and maintenance of our defense industrial base. Second, the leveraged application of ESF funds shapes and strengthens the political, social, and economic infrastructures. Similarly, IMET can produce positive results beyond military proficiency. IMET participation can bring change within the military through exposure to U.S. culture and values. IMET also provides enabling instruction in the administration of military organizations under civilian rule.

At its core, the purpose of security assistance is to influence the course of another sovereign nation in a direction favorable to our interests. Despite the benefits that may flow to the recipient of security assistance, the act of influencing internal decisions brings risk to the benefitting government. Popular support for the government can be eroded by a growing perception of a government "in the pocket" of the U.S., removed from the will of and accountability to the populace.¹⁸ Failure to design the aid program as a tool to build self-sufficiency also can create a dependency on the aid itself as the primary source of national survival, further eroding national confidence.

An ill-considered program of security assistance can produce effects that actually hazard U.S. interests. Necessary political or social reforms could be retarded by strengthening the incumbent power elite, such as a particular political faction or the military.²⁰ This can have the paradoxical effect of making a nation more stable, but simultaneously transforming it into a nation that we find politically repugnant. Similarly, building a military capability far beyond defense needs, or beyond the capacity for the civilian government to control its power, can result in regional instability.

Security assistance possesses an array of effective tools that can further U.S. interests. To be successful, its application must be balanced to safeguard the receiving nation's sense of autonomy, as well as enabling carefully considered U.S. goals. Specific programs must be matched to the receiving nation's security needs, and if appropriate, provision linked to discrete policy objectives such as human rights or political reform. An effective security assistance program must have defined objectives and goals that provide a method of measuring the effectiveness of the assistance. The program plan also should describe desired "end state" conditions when assistance should cease. Its successful application requires not only a concrete understanding of U.S.

objectives, but also a sensitivity to the unique political, societal and economic needs of the benefiting country. The security and self-sufficiency security assistance can bring to a friendly nation increases national and regional stability, which in turn improve our national security.

CHAPTER IV

THE SUITABILITY OF SECURITY ASSISTANCE FOR EL SALVADOR

As the previous section shows, security assistance can be an effective tool for advancing U.S. interests, but carries inherent risks. Is this the right tool at the right time for El Salvador? By posing several arguments for not continuing I will explore the suitability of continued security assistance:

"Previous security assistance was a failure in El Salvador because it didn't eliminate the communist insurgency." The physical destruction of all rebel forces was not the ultimate goal of security assistance to El Salvador. The goal was to ensure the viability of a free and democratic government, and to that end it has been successful. The insurgency was sufficiently countered, allowing a ten year period of democratic growth. The government of El Salvador, through the strengthening and restructuring of its security forces, gained breathing room to initiate reforms, conduct a series of legitimate (and heavily participated in) elections, and to steer a centrist course. It was this "balanced development" that started the erosion of the root causes of the insurgency, reducing the rebel's legitimacy. Through the application (and withholding) of security assistance, U.S. desired reforms such as human rights and judicial reform were initiated. Although the policy for the provision of aid sprung more from U.S.

legislative-executive dispute than from an integrated, seamless policy, in sum it represented U.S. desires, and it worked.²¹

"The need for security assistance ended with the signing of the peace accords." This argument mistakenly ascribes the end of open armed conflict with the rebel insurgency as the sole purpose of security assistance.²² Hopefully, the assimilation of the rebels into the legitimate political arenas will be successful. If it is, the most urgent security objectives will be met, precluding an immediate violent overthrow of the democratic government. Still, the need for sustained internal stability remains. In 1989, a State Department analysis estimated that the cumulative economic and infrastructure damage caused by the insurrection imperiled El Salvador's full transition to democracy as much as the insurgency itself.²³

"With the Salvadoran military reduced by half, security assistance is superfluous and dangerous." It is true that introducing excessive arms would be counterproductive to our goal of maintaining regional military balance.²⁴ Considering the ongoing border dispute between El Salvador and Honduras, it also could elevate Honduran anxiety. But the continued professionalization of the Salvadoran military becomes even more crucial during the strain of reorganization

and the incorporation of former rebels into military and political institutions. The recent inclusion of foreign defense ministry civilians in the IMET curricula can provide valuable assistance during and after the transition.²⁵ Even with arms sales limited to realistic self defense needs, the interoperability afforded by U.S. equipment and training can provide the U.S. a sympathetic infrastructure if needed for regional crisis response.²⁶

"We can no longer afford the financial burden of security assistance." This argument assumes away any cost of not continuing security assistance. It is impossible to quantify the opportunity cost of failing to carry through with our stated commitment to El Salvador in terms of diminished trust and regional prestige. Similarly, the future cost that may be imposed on the U.S. in a crisis requiring an armed response following a collapse of government or regional conflict is unknown. An intervention could be costly in lives and dollars, followed by the cost of restoring lost stability. Maintaining a significant armed presence in the region to achieve stability through deterrence also would be costly in dollars and changes in force structure, as well as undercutting our desired image as a regional "partner."

Finally, the sincerity of the rebels to be bound by the accord and not return to armed conflict must be considered.

The Salvadoran government could still face threats of active subversion from rebel holdout or splinter groups. A written communication between rebel leaders, captured by the Salvadoran Army in February 1988, stated:

"The dialogue is not an end. It is a means. Whatever form a negotiated political settlement takes does not mean that we cease the struggle. Even the best negotiated solution would mean that we would put more emphasis on the political, rather than the military struggle; in the most likely event, it would mean the continuation of the struggle in all its forms--political and military--but now from a position of legitimate and recognized power at the national and, to a good extent, international level."²⁷

In summary, it is my conclusion that there are appropriate applications for security assistance in El Salvador. Although the rebels have agreed to disarm and participate in the legitimate political arena, there still exists a potential for future instability. El Salvador still has far to go to correct factors that could reignite insurgency: a devastated economy, a crippled infrastructure, and a period of radical transition while attempting to assimilate the rebels. Security assistance programs can be effective in easing the transition, maintaining U.S. influence, and continuing the balanced development of El Salvador.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The U.S. does have a variety of interests in El Salvador. The gravity of these interests varies, but are dominated by the need to prevent an unstable El Salvador from disrupting regional peace and cooperation. Additionally, the history of U.S. commitment to the democratic government of El Salvador has put U.S. credibility on the line.

The long term viability of the democratic government of El Salvador is far from assured. The challenges it faces in shattered infrastructure, economic disarray, and assimilation of the rebels are formidable, especially in view of El Salvador's turbulent political history. U.S. security assistance has the potential to strengthen El Salvador's ability to overcome these challenges.

Future security assistance to El Salvador must be modified to reflect new realities. Grant aid and sales of military equipment should be reduced considering the reduction of the armed threat. IMET participation should be expanded to continue the professionalization of the armed forces, and to strengthen acceptance of civilian control. ESF support should be the primary aid instrument, focusing on nation building initiatives. Using ESF to provide U.S. Southern Command

military engineering support in physical infrastructure rebuilding would restore the type of basic national assets that are "the only embodiment for rural people of their national government."²²

The long term plan for security assistance should call for a phased reduction of ESF support as infrastructure is restored. These reductions should be tied to both achievement of goals and time. This would provide a visible time horizon for achieving self-sufficiency and reduce the danger of dependency, and prevent a perception of precipitous "abandonment." Long term IMET and FMF/FMS assistance would be continued at a reduced level, designed as a maintenance program to guarantee interoperability with U.S. forces, and preserve a "military-to-military" dialogue.

These proposals target what is currently the largest threat to the democratic government of El Salvador, the domestic factors that nurtured the insurgency. They are valid only in the context of the current political situation in El Salvador and current U.S. interests. Should either side of the equation change, the issue of continuing aid must be reexamined.

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